**WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS**
**5. HIS PROMISE**
**April 11, 2004**

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**Psalm 118:14–25**
**Luke 24:1–12**
**Romans 8:35–39**

**"Neither death, nor life, . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."**
**Romans 8:38–39 (NRSV)**

*Almighty God, we come to church this Easter morning*
*as we have all our lives—to hear news that is always new,*
*news that stretches our imaginations and fires our hope and kindles our love.*
*Thank you, dear God, for this morning.*
*And startle us with your truth,*
*that hearing we might believe and believing, trust you with our lives.*
*Through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.*

All over the world today, clergy—from the pope to the humblest pastor in a rural parish—have a problem. More people want to come to church today than on any other day of the year—sometimes more people than our pews will accommodate. In fact, it's not a problem for clergy at all. We don't have to stand in line to get in; we get a reserved seat. It's a problem for ushers and all those wonderful people who spend their morning trying to make everybody happy. It's a problem for faithful regulars who can't sit in their favorite pew. And it's a problem to the first-time visitor who comes at the right hour and is shunted off to a folding chair up on the second floor beside the copy machine. So, thank you to all the ushers and crowd management officials all over the world. And thank you to all who had to wait in line and who aren't sitting where you want to be sitting, thank you for your grace and patience. And thank you all for dressing up so gorgeously, particularly for those who sustain the wonderful tradition of Easter hats, or "crowns" as I have come to understand the proverbial Easter hat, and, by extension, the new Easter outfit that has always somehow been part of the holiday. Easter was the occasion, I recall, when you got to wear new clothes of some kind, a new jacket, new shoes, my first real suit, I remember. And part of the reason for the custom is celebrated in the wonderful musical *Crowns*, just finishing its run at the Goodman Theatre. "Crowns" refers to the

extravagant hats a group of African American women in Darlington, South Carolina, wear to church. An essay in the program explains that it wasn't easy for African American women to dress stylishly, except on Sunday morning: "her inner joy and self-confidence would be seen as inappropriate extravagance." And so evolved the fabulous "no-one-can-question-me hat to church." As Wanda, one of the women in the play says as she arranges her large, stylish hat on her head at just the right angle on Sunday morning, "I'm going to meet the King, so I must look my best."

We are all, in some way, this morning, Easter Sunday morning, here to meet the King.

He's been hard to miss recently. He's been in every magazine and on the cover of *Newsweek* and *Time's* recent issue. Thirty-four million Americans have seen *The Passion of the Christ*, paying an impressive $340 million. An unprecedented public conversation has been created, and clergy and churches, including this one, have seized the opportunity to talk about Jesus, his suffering and his death, which is the focus of the movie, but also his life—who he was and what he said and did. Some people don't like the movie at all because of its exclusive focus on the violence. Others are deeply moved by the depth and profundity of Jesus' suffering. A serious debate has evolved and, as is always the case when Christians disagree, so has name calling with accusations flying between the two camps, lovers and haters of the movie. In one instance it involved a married couple who saw the movie and came home and got into a vigorous argument that turned violent until the neighbors called the police who arrested them both. "The dumbest thing we ever did," they said afterward.

Ken Woodward, in *Newsweek*, called Jesus the most influential figure in our civilization. And my colleague John Cairns circulated an e-mail among the staff of this church reporting that in a recent poll, Jesus was voted the thirteenth-most-important American of all times.

Two questions beg to be asked: Why this fascination? In an age regularly called secular, why the obsession with Jesus? And, for today, what about Easter? If what we celebrate today had not happened, what would have become of Jesus and his reputation and his Passion and his followers. History is full, after all, of innocent victims and noble martyrs.

In Mel Gibson's motion picture, the torture, beating, and crucifixion of Jesus go on for two hours. The resurrection gets two minutes. A stone slowly moves away from the opening of a pitch dark tomb. Morning light follows the stone and pushes back the darkness. The risen Christ appears briefly and strides out into the sunlight to a crisp martial drum beat. Some saw militarism and the beginning of retaliation. Others saw an inspiring prelude to the rest of Christian history. In fairness, Gibson did not set out to tell the

whole story. His focus was the Passion. Also, in fairness, artists have never done as well with the resurrection as they have with the crucifixion. And the reason is simple. The resurrection of Jesus from death does not fit into our human experience the way suffering does. We know about suffering. We experience suffering. Resurrection doesn't happen every day the way suffering does. I'm glad Gibson didn't attempt more.

The first attempts to describe the resurrection used the words, the scriptural accounts. We read one of the four this morning, from the Gospel according to Luke. It begins on Friday, when a man by the name of Joseph asks Pontius Pilate's permission to take the lifeless body of Jesus down from the cross before the Jewish sabbath begins at sundown and bury it in his own garden grave. Pilate agrees. The women, Luke notes, are watching and, unlike the men who have all long since fled in fear, the women follow Joseph and watch as he places the body in the tomb. Then they go to wherever Jesus' friends are hiding and gather spices and oils to anoint the body after sabbath. On Saturday they observe Sabbath. And on Sunday at early dawn—the Greek word is actually "deep" dawn, that wonderfully opaque, eerily mysterious hour just before sunrise, when everything is gray and it is almost more difficult to see and distinguish objects—they return, the women do, not the men, to Joseph's garden tomb.

They find the stone rolled away and the body they intended to anoint gone. There are two men in dazzling clothes. The women are understandably terrified. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they are asked. "He is not here, but is risen." They return to their hiding place. The women tell the men. You can almost hear the scoffing, the arrogant dismissal—"an idle tale" the men called it. Peter runs to see, looks in, sees no body, returns home amazed. That's all there is.

What is curiously missing from the accounts is any note of celebration. There is no joyful shouting, no singing and dancing, no trumpets and Hallelujah Chorus. Instead, thanks be to God, there is something you and I can understand: surprise, fear, skepticism, and doubt.

In fact, when you try to put the four accounts of the resurrection together, there are discrepancies, conflicts, and a monumental amount of confusion. Matthew says there was an earthquake. There were two white clad figures —or maybe it was just one. Mary was alone or with other women. There was a man she thought was the gardener. Mary, mother of James, was there but maybe not. Peter came alone or with John.

I love the confusion, the running back and forth. I love the skepticism, the absence of histrionics. I love the sense that human beings are trying to understand what they just experienced, trying to appropriate something that doesn't square with what they know about life and death. They are

frightened, skeptical, and confused. I think the best evidence of the authenticity of the biblical accounts is precisely the fact that they are different and in some ways in conflict, that they are full of ambiguity and confusion. If the accounts were tidy and consistent and dramatic, you could argue that someone sat down in the year 35 A.D. and made this up.

But there they are, human beings like you and me trying for all they are worth to comprehend something that assaulted their common sense just like it assaults our common sense. Things like this just don't happen.

That's the deeper issue on Easter morning—the profoundly important matter of truth. Is truth defined ultimately and limited ultimately by human understanding, by human intellect and science and common sense? Or is there a truth bigger than human reason, a truth that transcends our ability to understand, a truth that flies in the face of the reality we experience, reality this morning that is at times brutal and dismal and deeply worrisome? It is, of course, the question of God. Is there a holy, transcendent God who may be trusted? Is there more to life than what we see and feel and taste and receive through our senses and read in the morning paper?

The theologians, the mystics, the artists, say yes. Ben Sparks, new editor of *Outlook* magazine, said in his Easter editorial this week, "There is something deeper here. It has everything to do with our trust in the living God. Do we believe that God can do what is humanly impossible? That God can make a way where there is no way?"

We'd love it if someone could just prove it. Presbyterian pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson remembers the preacher in his childhood church on Easter morning launching a sermon on the thirteen incontrovertible proofs that Jesus rose from the dead, "proofs with which we could wrestle to the ground our unbelieving friends." Mostly Peterson remembers that it took the preacher an excruciating hour and a half, "by which time nobody much cared anymore."

So the question of truth is on the table, and that is also the question of God and whether or not truth and, therefore, possibility are bigger than our minds or limited to the perimeters of the human intellect.

Death—Jesus' premature death, but death in general—is supremely logical, rational. We are born, we live, we wear out, we die.

William Sloane Coffin Jr., Yale chaplain, social activist, great preacher and prophet, is seriously ill and facing his own mortality. A new book of his collected reflections and thoughts has been published and is now, happily, a best seller, an unusual status for books by preachers. The last chapter of

the book is “The End of Life.” With typical irreverence, Bill puts the topic in perspective with a wry but wise observation:

> Without death we’d never live. . . . Consider the alternative. . . . Life without death would be interminable. . . . We’d take days just to get out of bed, weeks to decide “what’s next?” Students would never graduate, faculty meetings and all kinds of [committee meetings] would go on for months. Chances are we’d be as bored as the ancient Greek gods. (*Credo,* p. 167)

Without death, we’d never get anything done, never make a difficult decision.

And then, reflecting on his own death I assume, Coffin cites the verse from Job “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away” and writes, “That does not mean that God is responsible for every death. What it means is that before every birth and after every death there is still God. . . . The abyss of God’s love is deeper than the abyss of death.”

He continues, “Paul insists that neither life nor death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. If death, then, is no threat to our relationship with God—it is no threat to anything; if we don’t know what is beyond the grave, we know who is beyond the grave” (pp. 167-171).

The final enemy, the final threat, of course, is death: the death of ideas and institutions, the death of hope and love, our own death, the “insult of our mortality” someone called it. Asked what she had to say about death, Dorothy Parker responded acidly, “I do not approve.”

We don’t approve. The disciples of Jesus watched helplessly as the real power of this world, rational, reasonable power exercised by the state, backed by the military, urged on by religious narrowness and self-righteousness, plotted, closed in on, condemned, tortured, and killed Jesus. A lot more than Jesus died on that Friday afternoon. Their dream of a new world, a new society based not on force and military might but on love and compassion and forgiveness, died on the cross that afternoon. Their dream of a new kingdom, a new society that included all, not just the righteous, a radical new society that reached out to welcome and include all those despised, rejected, marginalized, and excluded, died on the cross. Their dream that he had so winsomely planted in their hearts, that love is stronger than death, that it is happier to give than to receive, that real life is a gift given to those who spend out their lives in love and service to others instead of greedily accumulating and hoarding and conserving, that died too. And their dream that life is more powerful than death, that death is no longer the threat under which all life is lived, that, too, died as the life ebbed out of their friend.

And what is raised up on the first day of the week is all of that: dreams and hopes and love and compassion and determination to be part of that new world coming—that's what is raised up with Jesus Christ. It didn't die. Love is alive! Love is loose in the world!

Henri Nouwen wrote beautifully, on the occasion of his mother's death,

> The resurrection is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost. The resurrection doesn't answer any of our common questions about life after death such as: "How will it be? How will it look?" But it does reveal to us that love is stronger than death. God's love for us, our love for each other, and our love for those who lived before and will live after us is not just a quickly passing experience, but a reality transcending all time and space. (*Our Greatest Gift*)

That's what this day means. Love—God's love for us, our love for God and one another—is stronger than—a more real reality—than death itself. Truth is bigger than we can understand. Truth comes into our lives this day, like light shining in darkness. "Truth," Emily Dickinson said "must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind."

No one understands completely at the moment. They certainly didn't. Nor do we. Like them, truth about resurrection, about love stronger than death, comes as we allow it into our lives, our worldview, our hopes and dreams and commitments.

There is a lot of bad pulpit humor on Easter Sunday—the preacher wishes everybody a pleasant summer and happy Thanksgiving because he or she won't see them all again until next Christmas. Every year I vow not to do it and then find some way to say it. But I also always try to say that if you only come to church once a year, this is the Sunday to do it. The music is never better. The flowers are always gorgeous, and there are all those wonderful hats, crowns. But let me add a respectful postscript. If what you have heard this Sunday doesn't change you, you aren't getting it either, and I don't just mean forswearing golf or coffee and the Sunday *Times* for church on Sunday morning. I mean the invitation to all of us to live in a new world today and tomorrow—a new world where love and compassion and service are operative, a world suddenly and gloriously free from the fear of death, a world where you and I are free to live and love with passionate abandon, a world where the basic reality is in the promise:

> Nothing—not death nor life—nothing in all creation—particularly not death—will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the life of this and every congregation, people are born and people die. Within the congregation are people who have lost dear ones. One of our own who died last year was Virginia Sudler. Virginia, I don't think, would mind my talking about her because she loved this church so much. Her husband's father helped build this building and chose his pew on the south aisle for the best view of his dear friend, John Timothy Stone, in the pulpit. Virginia sat in that pew every Sunday until illness confined her to her apartment. I used to visit her every Good Friday afternoon, and on one of my visits, as I left, she said, "I'll see you Sunday morning." "Oh," I said, "you're coming to church?" "No," she said, "you know I can't do that. But I'll be at the sunrise service on Oak Street Beach at 6:30. I have my nurse get me up and help me dress and put on my Easter hat and wheel me to the window where I can look down and watch the sunrise service."

That's my resurrection picture this year. All the faithful—safe, secure, forever, in the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So breathe easily, live deeply, love passionately, hold tightly to your dear ones, give your life away.

> Christ is risen and nothing in all creation, not even death, can separate you from the love of God—in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.